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SUBJECT: TURKEY AND IRAQ: PRESIDENT GUL GOES TO BAGHDAD

Classified By: Ambassador James Jeffrey for reasons 1.4(b,d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Turkish President Abdullah Gul conducted what GOT officials described as a very successful, if largely symbolic, visit to Baghdad March 24-25. The Turks had low expectations for concrete deliverables emerging from the visit. What was more important was the fact a Turkish head of state was traveling to Iraq for the first time since 1976.

Recognizing the magnitude of the occasion and the message it connotes regarding Turkish-Iraqi relations and Turkish confidence in the improved security situation in Iraq, Gul insisted on doing an overnight visit and bringing his wife with him. Meeting with all of Iraq's senior leaders except KRG President Massoud Barzani, Gul underscored Turkey's interest in continuing to build upon a relationship that has improved quickly over the past 18 months since PM Maliki's initial visit to Ankara in August 2007. Gul met with his counterpart, President Talabani, Vice Presidents Hashimi and Abdul Mehdi, PM Maliki, KRG PM Nechirvan Barzani, former PM Ayad Allawi, the Minister of Youth and Sports Jasem Mohammed Jaafar) the lone ethnic Turkmen in PM Maliki's cabinet, ethnic Turkmen deputies who serve in the Council of Representatives, and representatives of all the major political parties who participated in a dinner hosted by President Talabani. The primary deliverable was the signing of a comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement.

12. (C) SUMMARY, CONT': The Turks remain uncertain why KRG President Massoud Barzani chose not to travel to Baghdad to meet with Gul and were disappointed that he did not. They wondered whether Barzani was actually in Europe for health reasons, as they were led to believe, whether it was due to Barzani's continued difficulties with Maliki, or because of an issue Barzani has with the Turks. The visit played well in the Turkish press, with the only controversy surrounding whether Gul actually uttered the heretofore politically taboo word "Kurdistan" to traveling press on the way to Baghdad when referring to the KRG authorities. Most commentators saw Gul's use of the term as a positive, but opposition attacks in this pre-election atmosphere perhaps made Gul think otherwise. He claimed upon return to Ankara that he did not say "Kurdistan" but rather referred to "Kurdish" regional authorities. END SUMMARY

SHORT ON SUBSTANCE, LONG ON SYMBOLISM

13. (C) MFA Department Head for Iraq Aydin Acikel and First Secretary Anil Inan told us March 26 President Gul's two-day visit to Baghdad had gone extremely well from Turkey's perspective. The Iraqis had done everything in their power to facilitate the logistical and security arrangements for Gul's visit, as had the U.S. Embassy and MNF-I, for which they expressed much gratitude. The visit had been relatively short on substance and deliverables, but it was the symbolism of a Turkish head of state visiting Baghdad for the first time in 33 years that underscored Turkey's support for Iraq, while Gul's decision to bring along his wife and remain overnight emphasized Turkish confidence in the new, improved security situation.

14. (C) Presidency Chief of Staff Avni Karslioglu told DCM Gul's meeting with Talabani had very good atmospherics, with a lot of general discussion about the need to continue to increase business ties and support for cooperation on energy projects. The meeting with Nechirvan Barzani was good, though not quite as warm as that with Talabani. The Turks wondered whether Massoud Barzani's decision not to go to Baghdad to meet with Gul was really due to health reasons. He had called the Turks in the days preceding the visit to request whether Gul would see instead his PM, Nechirvan. Karslioglu speculated that perhaps Barzani's reticence to go to Baghdad was because of his difficulties with Maliki, but hoped it wasn't a bigger problem that he has with the Turks. He added both Talabani and Nechirvan expressed concern to Gul about Maliki, noting they remain suspicious of his long-term

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goals, the direction in which he is likely to seek to take Iraq, and the likely coalition partners he may end up governing with in the future. For his part, Maliki told Gul he believes the Kurds have overplayed their hand. He also expressed gratitude to Gul for Turkey opening its consulate in Basra and asked Gul to work toward bringing more Turkish investment and trade to Iraq's southeast.

PKK REMAINS ISSUE NUMBER ONE, BUT ECONOMIC COOPERATION ALSO KEY

15. (C) Acikel noted Gul met tte--tte with President Talabani, PM Maliki, and KRG PM Nechirvan Barzani, in addition to delegation meetings with all three. Discussion centered on Turkey's continued concerns about the presence of PKK terrorists in northern Iraq, ongoing trilateral cooperation to facilitate cooperation in countering that presence, and future prospects for broader and deeper Turkish engagement with Iraq, especially economically. The two sides signed a comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement, which covers a host of areas in which the two countries hope to improve cooperation, ranging from granting most favored nation trading status and freedom of transit of goods to enhancing mutual investment, industrial cooperation, transportation links, and, perhaps most importantly, energy cooperation. (Full text transmitted via e-mail to NEA/I and EUR/SE by Embassy Baghdad)

16. (C) Acikel told us the Turkish side had hoped to come to agreement on the bilateral counterterrorism agreement that was all but finalized in September 2007 but remained in limbo because of continued disagreement over article 4 on the concept of hot pursuit. The Turks had reached internal interagency agreement just days before the visit that there was no longer a need to include an explicit reference to the right of both states for hot pursuit of terrorists into the territory of the other and proposed new language to the Iraqi side the day before Gul's visit in hopes of finalizing the agreement. Iraqi Interior Minister Bolani met with Turkish MOI Atalay on the margins of the visit and they agreed that the Iraqi side should have more time to evaluate Turkey's proposed changes before seeking final signature. Acikel made clear the change in approach by the GOT does not signal

Turkey's intent to end periodic cross border operations in northern Iraq to degrade or eliminate the ability of the PKK to conduct operations from there, but rather reflects the current reality that such operations are occurring routinely with little objection from the Iraqi side and an understanding that Baghdad, and to some extent Erbil, are comfortable with the status quo provided operations remain limited and clearly focused on PKK targets. With that mutual understanding, the GOT no longer requires an explicit commitment on the part of the Iraqis to permit such actions by Turkey in an agreement, which the Turks understand would be extremely difficult if not entirely impossible to gain Council of Representatives, concurrence.

¶7. (C) Gul emphasized to his Iraqi interlocutors the importance of eliminating the PKK threat to Turkey in northern Iraq, noting the degree to which Turkey-Iraq, and Turkey-KRG, ties could improve if that impediment is finally removed. Acikel said Talabani and Barzani both expressed appreciation for steps Turkey had taken to address some of the long-standing complaints of its Kurdish population, citing the institution of Kurdish language television broadcasting on the new TRT-6 and Kurdish-language education faculties at some universities as important steps. However, they noted amnesty for PKK fighters will remain the critical issue in ending hostilities. Gul did not make a commitment to granting amnesty, rather making clear that this is a domestic issue for discussion within Turkish society. A major issue related to the visit for the Turkish media involved reports that Gul had made specific reference to the "Kurdistan" Regional Government while speak with reporters on the plane on the way down to Baghdad March 23. Reporters

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noted this was the first occasion that a senior GOT official uttered the word "Kurdistan" publicly. While some opposition leaders were critical, most commentators viewed it in a positive light, especially given Gul's follow-on comment that the Iraqi Constitution makes specific reference to the Kurdistan regional authority, so why shouldn't he? Upon his return on March 25, perhaps recognizing that upsetting nationalist voters is not a good idea as Turks prepare to go to the polls for local elections March 29, Gul was backtracking, saying he had not said "Kurdistan" but rather referred to the "Kurdish" regional authority.

¶8. (C) Barzani and Talabani also discussed in general terms the conference of Kurdish political entities the KRG plans to organize for late April/early May, where they hope to gain broad support for a call to the PKK to give up its armed struggle and agree to proceed on a strictly political path to achieve its aims. The Turks remain somewhat concerned, according to Acikel, that Massoud Barzani and Talabani may not be able to control what emerges from the conference, which could then end up as a platform for PKK positions. However, Nechirvan Barzani and Talabani sought to reassure Gul and the Turks that the conference and its results will not endanger the improving Turkey-Iraq or Turkey-KRG relationships.

¶9. (C) Finally, the Iraqis raised water issues with Gul, noting with concern that the percentage of arable land in Iraq is shrinking by 5 percent per year due to insufficient water resources for irrigation. Acikel and Inan noted that Turkey continues to provide guaranteed flow of 500 million cubic meters per second on the Euphrates to Syria and Iraq, as it has for the past several decades. One explanation for diminishing flow on the Euphrates may be dam construction by the Syrians, who may be restricting flow. They pointed out that they have very little control over the flow of the Tigris, where they have few dams and those that they have planned are facing opposition from environmentalists and historical preservationists.

¶10. (C) COMMENT: Progress in increasing bilateral cooperation between Turkey and Iraq is slow and incremental, but

represents a sea change from where the two countries were 12-18 months ago. While the presence of the PKK in northern Iraq remains the number one topic in the relationship from the Turkish perspective, no longer are all other subjects put on hold until the PKK issue is solved. Turkish officials have recognized such an approach ran contrary to Turkey's long-term interests in supporting Iraq's continued democratic and economic development and consolidation of the great gains over the past year on the security front, as well as its aim to serve as an effective counterweight to Iranian influence. As a result, the trajectory of Turkey-Iraq relations is on a steep upward track relative to past decades. GOT officials, though still wary that things in Iraq could still go very wrong, are prepared to do all they can to ensure that they do not.

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Jeffrey